Cities in the Suburbs Revisited

An Address at UBC

Humphrey Carver, 1968

CITIES IN THE SUBURBS
REVISITED

AN ADDRESS BY HUMPHREY CARVER
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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The exploration of space has now brought back quite
a lot of photographs of the surface of the moon. We are shown
a grey monotonous landscape of rocks and stones, extending to
the horizon in the same repetition of rocks and stones and rocks
and stones - and nothing else.

It is a scene out of a nightmare. There would be no
point, you feel, in going anywhere, because there's nowhere to go.
Because of the absence of atmosphere there isn't even the difference
between snow on the heights and ocean in the depths. Up or down,
this way and that way, it's all the same.

There is no film of organic life,- trees and mosses
and animals - that might reveal the differences and changes in
climate and environment. The whole bloody place is changeless,
inert and like that forever.

People who have nightmares about the cities we live in
are inclined to make much the same kind of comment. The modern
big city has become an endless repetition of the same things,
over and over again, to the horizon. It's all so much the same,
this way and that way, up and down, the same from one city to
another, that the city scene has a blighting effect on the mind
and the imagination. The monotony is ffighteningly oppressive
and its no wonder that city people,who have any spirit left in
them, must rebel and protest and let their feelings go in riots.

It's also to be expected that inquisitive people
—which means you and me — are fascinated by this human perversity.
How can it be that this intelligent creature, Man, at the summit
of his capacities, has constructed an environment around himself
which is almost as tedious, ugly, boring and nighmarish as the
surface of the inorganic moon ? It's also to be expected that
some intelligent people — you and me, again — would try to puzzle
out how the forms of cities could be made the very opposite of
boring and repetitive. If one kind of city is so crushingly
monotonous that it provokes riots and kills the spirit, then what
kind of city would have the effect of stimulating the mind and
celebrating man's intellectual command over the physical environment ?
~~that he has the power to create for himself~~ ?

Throughout history people of a philosophical turn of mind
have been bothered by this human perversity. The Bible is full
of allusions and images of heavenly cities. Greek philosophers
and Renaissance scholars conceived model cities and invented
Utopias. But only in quite recent times has this vein of philosophy
really come to the surface; only in our own age has the blight of
big cities become so real and so serious that even the most pragmatic
~~unimaginative~~ politicians have had to seek out the visionaries
— like you and me — to set new ambitions for building cities.

In response to the present malaise and unrest in American
cities, President Johnson has offered what is called the "Model
Cities" programme. And a couple of months ago our own Prime Minister
Pearsom summoned a federal-provincial conference to discuss
the future of our Canadian cities. He also had proposals for a
"New Communities"programme as a way of breaking out of our tedious
environment. But I'm sorry to say that the provincial premiers at
the conference, every one of them, failed to get the point. They
went home grumbling about the lack of money rather than grumbling about the lack
of an idealistic programme. The premier of British Columbia
didn't even bother to go to the conference.

Perhaps you think that there's not much need to bother
about this kind of thing in Vancouver, because this is a lovely
city, ~~a kind of~~ Shangri-La, ~~that~~ doesn't suffer from this blight
of monotony. But is this mostly because the ~~distant~~ mountains
take one's eyes off the immediate foreground , which is probably rather
worse than most Canadian cities? Is it significant that whatever
good examples there are here - for instance this UBC campus or
the Simon Fraser campus - are the result of their detachment and
separation from the city itself ? Why this rush to North Vancouver,
for those who can't escape from the city quickly enough ? And,
of ,course, ~~tStanleyaPark; where every prospect pleases, only~~ serves
to remind us that the natural world is inherently beautiful in our
eyes and only man is vile. The good things about Vancouver are
mostly non-city.

I am one of the many who have made an attempt to think
out this puzzle of the modern city and how we could try to make
it a place that would not only work well – efficiently and econ-
omically – but also have a real excellence and beauty. My modest
effort at this is written in a paperback book called "Cities in
the Suburbs", published by the University of Toronto Press in 1962.

I started by trying to explain to my own satisfaction
the three familiar complaints and sorrows about the city: The
Lament about its Muddle, the Lament about its Uniformity and
what I called the Lament about What Isn't There.

Under the heading of "Muddle" I awarded equal first prize
to Montreal's Decarie Boulevard, to Toronto's upper Avenue Road,
to Winnipeg's Pembina Highway and to the leagues of dreary sprawl
between Vancouver and New Westminster. All four cities have, I
think, scored about the same in producing something really beastly.

Uniformity, the second Lament, is of course the threat
that haunts any society that has been successful in acquiring a
universal educational system, a welfare state and mass-production
industry. How can we enjoy these benefits and also have personal
individuality and freedom of expression and different tastes?
This is the problem that the Hippy generation has confronted us with,
quite rightly. We have not yet had time to think it out.
I think my generation found a genuine aesthetic satisfaction in the
precise uniformity that came from the application of the machine-tool.
We have enjoyed the architecture of Mies van der Rohe and the
hard-edge, precise, black-and-white qualities of modern architects
and designers. We have scorned the suburban home-owner's pathetic
attempt to make his little mass-produced unit look different from
those next door. This aesthetic judgement is now being violently
challenged, and in a very interesting way, by the style-conscious
Hippies. Your generation will look at this question in a way
somewhat different from mine.

The Lament about "What Isn't There" is a way of
saying that cities have somehow become disappointing places
because there are no climaxes and no points of emphasis on the
things of excellence and beauty. If there are ideas of real
importance in our lives, something we really believe in, surely these
should somehow be evident in the form of the city. Where do people
go in the city to lift their hearts and minds and spirits ? What
would you lay down your life to defend, in the city ? A shopping Centre ?
Or is the city as faceless and expressionless as the Moon ?

As an approach to trying to answer these questions, my
book then takes a general quick look at the most important historical
statements of Utopias and Model Cities; this is an attempt to
understand what are the important themes and central ideas that have
inspired people to think about better cities. If you go through
the record from 16th. century Thomas More, the inventor of the term
Utopia, to 20th. century Frank Lloyd Wright and le Corbusier you
find at least one continuous thread of discussion; how to reconcile
the claims and the attractions of the city and the countryside, the
Townscape and the Landscape. This is not just a design question,
about how to get trees and open spaces within the city and how to
get access to the mountains and the sea. It's also got to do with
the choice between the city, as a place of organised corporate authority where
a man loses his identity in the crowd, and the country, as a place
where you are isolated and alone with nature and, so it has been
commonly believed, more free. This is certainly still a dilemma
because, all over the world, rural people continue to flock to
the cities, seeking freedom in choosing their careers and their
companions. And at the same time city people crowd the highways
& escape back into the country —

This dilemma about city and country is important because, to some extent, the whole *surgance* of modern Suburbia can be explained as an attempt to get away from the city and live in the country. *Of course* This usually turns out to be a great illusion because *and up the mountainside,* the open country keeps on disappearing over the horizon, the more people go chasing it. In our big *leave in the greater I.* cities, there is certainly a great deal to be done about the access to open spaces; but this is, in a sense, the obverse and negative side of the *subject* of planning cities. It's even more important to turn around and look at the city itself, to try and discover *positive* some ideal model for the city itself. Anyone who attempts to think this through, for the modern big city region is, I believe, bound to come to a conclusion something like this:

When you look at a city either as a physical form or as *a* social reality or *as* an economic network, what you are looking at is *an enormous* number of different systems within which we conduct our lives, all interwoven in a very intricate way. There are transportation systems, educational systems, political systems, the systems of the market places for employment and for *serving* consumer requirements; there are systems for producing housing, for delivering welfare of different kinds, for recreation and for entertainment, for communicating information and ideas and for forming our *opinions* about society and about all these different systems.

These are all systems in the sense that they each have their own corporate organisation, with people managing and being managed, people making decisions and other people obeying or resisting them. Most of these systems have money and budgets and occupy space in buildings in the city. There are also systems in a somewhat looser sense, like the system of family life which governs so much of our behaviour.

In the modern city region we have got into difficulties because we have *accumulated* developed so many systems as the accumulated framework of our lives and they have become entwined with one another in a very complicated way.

It wasn't too difficult to make an effective and
beautiful city in an earlier historical period when the systems of life
were relatively simple and small in number. When people lived
completely under the single authority of the Church or the State,
in mediaeval or renaissance periods, obviously the Cathedral or
the Palace dominated the city. All streets and all views led up
to the central feature of the city and everyone's lives were governed
by this centralising system. The whole pattern and plan of the city
expressed this powerfully and dramatically.

But the modern city is quite different because we have
proliferated and multiplied the systems. In the pursuit of democracy
and individuality and economic freedom and personal enterprise
and mobility, the modern city has become a fantastic complex of
systems. The reasonable organisation of the city has become
extraordinarily difficult because the requirements of one system clash
with another and the general conflict for the use of city space ends
in muddle and confusion. Stir all this up and spread it out over
the whole face of the city region, and what results is a pretty grey
and monotonous affair, lacking any strong points of emphasis and
destination.

Perhaps the most obvious clashes are caused by the
transportation system. It has to impose its network everywhere in a
city and its very difficult to do this without damaging and
interrupting other systems. The new type of express freeway tends
to destroy the amenities of property wherever it goes. In the
suburbs noone would choose to have a house looking out on the
freeway traffic, so it's a blight on residential land wherever it goes.
In the centre of the city whole blocks of useful buildings are
continually being destroyed by new freeways. In an extraordinary
number of American and Canadian cities intense battles have been
in the last year or two
fought to prevent freeways being built on waterfronts and so
destroying an important part of the community's recreation system.

Perhaps the most fundamental clash occurs between the city
systems that benefit from low density and the systems that work
best at a high density of development. City families have been
able to enjoy the pleasures of living in low-density suburbs largely
through the financial system that enables them to borrow money
so that they can buy houses and cars on a monthly payment basis.
The systems of home-ownership and car-ownership work well together
at low density. But the convenience and efficiency of city centres
work best with a very high concentration of buildings. The clash
occurs because the low-density suburbs can absorb all the cars at
night, but in the daytime the cars just dont fit into the system
that requires great concentration at the city centre. Our cities
have spent millions of dollars on Transportation Studies that purport
to them out this problem - quite apart from the millions spent
on actually building traffic facilities.
Efforts to house city people properly have generally been
a head-on collision between the motives of the welfare
system and the political system. It is well-known that most
suburban municipalities deliberately make it difficult to build
economical small houses which would attract families with a lot of
children and hence impose on the municipality the cost of building
more school accomodation. Also all-out best efforts to develop a
system of subsidised housing for people of low income are frustrated
by suburban municipaliities. Our democratic philosophy persuades
us that people of modest income ought to be able to enjoy some
of the space and the conveniences of suburban living. But this
clashes with the system of local government, so all the poor
people end up in ghettos which is exactly what we were trying to
prevent.

I think you can see that the attempt to make an effective and beautiful city, out of this multiple-system society, becomes an exercise in trying to make the systems work together, instead of being abrasive to one another. How would you set about to do this ?

The expression "Cities in the Suburbs" and the pattern on the cover of the book suggest a way of dealing with the problem. The problem simply becomes more manageable if you can make the life of the city and the design of the city revolve around a number of sub-centres or nucleus points or town-centres. Each of these can be the central point of several systems, clustered together on a local scale. I suggested in my book that it works quite well to bunch together a High School, a Shopping Centre, certain community services like clinics and libraries and day-care centres. If this was also an administrative sub-centre within the local governme nt system, so much the better. Once you have grouped these focal services together, the design of a whole community within the city begins to fall into place in a logical and reasonable way. Obviously you would provide housing, nearest to the centre, for those who are least mobile and must reach these services on foot - particulrly older people and poorer people. So the highest density housing should be grouped around these centres and the lowest-density housing, containing households which are most mobile, with two cars, should be furthest from these focal points.

Once the form of the city has begun to crystallise into these points of concentration surrounded by areas of dispersal, the networks of the transportation system and the open space system can be designed to fit. Obviously each suburban Town Centre would be a key point of origin and destination on both a freeway system and a public transportation system.

Here at least is an understandable theory about how to
build a great city- hitching networks of systems on to a series of
climax points. The artist, the urban designer, the economist, the
visionary - you and me - can begin to picture one of these Town Centres.
I tried to describe such a place in a short cahapter of my book.
It consisted of three great squares or landscape spaces or campuses
ascending up the slope of a hill: one square for shops and restaurants
and bright-light entertainments, the second square for the educational
and recreation and theatre buildings and a smaller and more concentrated
square for the more formal and c.higherated buildings containing
lawyers and doctors offices, local administration offices and things
of that kind. And in the trees at the top of the hill are several
churches. Perhaps the whole place has some of the scale and dramatic
effect of ~~the UBC campus or of~~ Simon Fraser University.   *in the book*

It seemed to me important to include this quite romantic
and rather emotional description if one was going to claim that there
really is a chance for the modern city to fulfil all one's dreams
about the city as ~~a beautiful place~~ a work of art. This is the only
possible response to those who rebel against the city of the nightmare.
The Hippy generation, the negro people caged in the centres of American
cities, all who have satirised the ugliness and triviality of cities
in paintings and in literature - they ~~are quite right to expect~~ *dserve* this
kind of response.

However its not much use having nightmares about the moon,
and lamenting that the city isn't what it ought to be and having
psychedelic dreams and writing romantic accounts of what the city
might be. The most difficult thing is in bringing the psychedelic
dream to reality. This doesn't happen by wearing funny clothes
and by draping oneself against a lamp-post. It requires the posture
of the activist. And, to make things more difficult, it requires
the activist to operate within the three-level political system
that we have in Canada.   One can only say that the difficulty
of this is apalling.

political activism

The first move in this direction had to come from President Johnson (In the United States) (the "Model Cities" programme); and in Canada it had to come from Prime Minister Pearson in Canada (the New Communities programme) because it is only the federal governemnt that can provide the money to stage a big break-through in our way of building cities. And this has to take the form of a proposition made to provincial governments because they alone have the legal authority for making plans and carrying them out. And it has to involve local city and town governments because they represent us all, at the grass roots, in deciding how we want to live together and manage aour affairs in urban communities. So I repeat: the difficulty of bringing the psychedelic dream to reality is apallingly difficult, not only because of the inherent complexity of the city itself, with its network of systems, but because it's also necessary to be an activist within a complicated three-level system of government. So a generation which simply laments and leans languidly against lamp-posts isn't likely going to change anything to make important changes.

I want to finish by mentioning what the federal government has already proposed to do, that would be useful in carrying out the kind of thing suggested in my book "Cities in the Suburbs".

First of all it has proposed to put up the money for buying large pieces of land for building whole new communities on the fringes of big cities. This would include land for the focal point or town centre at the middle and the serrounding residential areas served by the town centre. The federal government would share in the cost of designing whole new communities and would help to attract private house-builders and developers to join together in building a whole town within this general design scheme. The proposal would also benefit the local government by providing, free of charge, all the land needed for public uses, such as schools and parks and the other community services at the town centre. The federal government wouldn't expect to lose any money on this because it would undoubtedly make some profit out of the sale of land to the private developers. Incidentally, this would implement an important principle

of community growth. I mean the principle that increases in land value
which occur as the result of the community's growth should accrue
to the benefit of the whole community, rather than end up as the
private profit from land speculation.

So, in the federal government's legislation now
being discussed, there is the opportunity to break out of the
entanglement if provincial and local governments are willing to join
in this kind of public enterprise, to build some beautiful new parts
of our cities.

The second proposal made by the federal governemnt
is for buying land for what are called "transportation corridors"
and land for the permanent open spaces within cities. The federal
government would provide funds for these purposes on the condition that
the big cities had prepared regional plans to decide on the land to
be chosen for the new suburban communities and the land chosen for
permanent open space and the land chosen for transportation corridors.

The expression "transportation corridor" is
intended to mean a broad winding ribbon of open landscape, perhaps a
third of a mile to one mile wide. It would be wide enough to contain
several kinds of traffic route: a fast commercial freeway, perhaps
combined with a rapid transit bus service; a more leisurely parkway
through the ribbon of land; also the service reads giving access
to the adjacent property and all the necessary interchanges and
customer services required on major transportation routes. If the
land bought and reserved for a transportation corridor were wide
enough and designed like a park, with rolling ground as a sound
barrier and an interesting variety of tree-planting as a visual
barrier — then this ribbon or corridor of space would be an enjoyment
to those who would live beside it. This would be a revolutionary
change in the character of big cities where the main transportation
routes have normally been a blight upon the very people and property
they are intended to serve. This is not, of course, a new idea but rather

Cities in the Suburbs

Humphrey Carver

DESCRIPTION

We are all familiar with the almost ritual lament about the desolation and sameness of the suburbs that surround our modern cities. Is this complaint inevitable or can something be done to lend variety, colour, and meaning to these spreading areas? In a book full of good questions and apt illustrations, Mr. Carver examines what has provided a sense of community for city groupings of the past and how leading planners of our day (Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright) have suggested it be found for modern cities.

His own proposal for achieving this goal is a very simple one and originates in the earlier views of a city as a place in which an urban society achieves its individual character by congregating around its own social institutions. Somehow today we have to recover this simple idea about a city and apply it to the contemporary sprawling urban region.

"The exposing metropolis" is a good descriptive term for the modern city, with its social institutions removed from the original centre and scattered into the suburbs. Now we should try to rearrange suburban growth so that each new community can grow up around its own vigorous and attractive "Town Centre," a place that can command the interest and pride of those who live immediately around it. These small cities in our suburbs would not just be dormitories for their central core city, but rather communities in their own right and the new kind of town centre would give a focus for their social, political, and cultural life.

The idea of metropolitan or regional government for large urban areas has been much debated in Canada. But there has not been a clear view of how such governments could give birth to new daughter communities around them. The establishment of new "Town Centres" in growing suburban areas would be a workable method of helping these new settlements through a period of growth. Housing and commercial developments would then be able to gather in an organized fashion around the focal point in a regional plan. It is hoped this suggestion will be taken up by local politicians and their professional staffs but they cannot steer towards long-term objectives of this kind unless the general public understands the general philosophy involved.

This is a lively book, hopeful in its suggestions and cheerful in its phrasing, and it should provoke eager discussion. It is illustrated with unusual line drawings to point up the argument and with many photographs.

AUTHOR/EDITOR BIOGRAPHY

Humphrey Carver (1902-1995), before he retired in 1967, was on the staff of the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, as Chairman of the Advisory Group. He is the author of *Houses for Canadians*, *Cities in the Suburbs*, and numerous journal articles.

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